

Crossing the Cultural Barrier:



Leadership Learning for an International Audience

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Teaching self-awareness to a group of Coast Guardsmen with varying backgrounds can be challenging. Teaching this to an international audience raises the challenge to an entirely new level. As part of a Memorandum of Understanding with the World Maritime University (WMU) in Malmö, Sweden, Mr. Charlie Coiro and Lieutenant Andrew Halvorson from the Leadership Development Center and U.S. Coast Guard Academy, respectively, focused their efforts to teach leadership principles to 61 maritime affairs graduate students from 33 countries.

Applying leadership principles, self awareness, and motivation strategies in a maritime work environment is not unique, but translating these tools for use in so many various cultures can be difficult, at best. When delivering a course to such a diverse group, it is important to consider variables such as political, social and religious beliefs, as well as the different priorities of the various nations.

The instructor's first generated a common ground for the class through incorporation of a case study recounting the historic voyage of Ernest Shackleton, an early 1900's polar explorer. Throughout the week, students discussed leadership principles and applied those principles to how Shackleton overcame his leadership challenges during his historic voyage aboard the Endurance.

But once they established this common ground, efforts shifted to identify similarities between the various students, their cultures and beliefs. One exercise facilitated this, in that the students individually listed values that were of the most importance to them. Among the most popular answers were family and religion. Identifying these commonalities helped strengthen the group dynamic of the class, generating more engaging and open discussions.

Many of the Leadership Challenge ideas were new to the students; most had never received formal leadership training or education. Approaching the class from an interactive perspective, the instructors provided practical situations to foster discussion which enabled the students to easily transfer theories into practice. Throughout the week, students grew from skeptics into true believers of the importance of exercising positive leadership, realizing that they were in the position to influence change within their own nations and organizations.

This is the second year of the seminar, conducted in support of the Memorandum of Understanding between WMU and the USCG. Founded by the International Maritime Organization, the WMU specializes in education, research, and capacity building to ensure safe and secure shipping throughout the world. Celebrating their 30th Anniversary this year, WMU has been supported by the U.S. Coast Guard through assignment of a guest lecturer position since 1987. The author is currently the incumbent.

(See Pictures Below)



From Left to Right: LCDR Erin Williams, Mr. Charles Coiro,
Dr. Björn Kjerne, and LT Andy Halvorson



Many of the graduates who attended the USCG Leadership Course